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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002957

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN VIEWS OF ELECTIONS IN ABKHAZIA

REF: MOSCOW 1403

Classified By: A/Pol M/C David Kostelancik for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: Experts do not see a strong Russian influence in the election campaign in the Georgian region of Abkhazia. This is due to Russia's negative experience from getting too involved in the 2005 elections, the dominance of domestic issues in the campaign, and a virtual agreement among the key contenders regarding Russia-Abkhaz relations. For the foreseeable future, Abkhazia will remain under the influence of Russia, regardless of the political situation. End Summary.

Russia's support for candidates

¶12. (C) Russian experts do not see strong Russian influence over the December 12 "elections" in Abkhazia. According to Alexander Konovalov of the Institute for Strategic Assessments, Russia learned from its experience in the 2005 Abkhaz elections, when Russia inadvertently helped Sergei Bagapsh win by backing his opponent too forcefully. Konovalov said that since then the GOR has learned to respect Bagapsh as a statesman, but was not openly supporting any candidate this time around. Ivan Sukhov wrote in "Vremya Novostey Online" that "excessive Russian intervention in Abkhaz politics has always aroused resentment." Conversely, Nikoloz Tskilauri from the Georgian embassy asserted that Moscow supported Bagapsh, and considered that this would give him an advantage during the elections.

Candidates' views of Russia

¶13. (C) Our contacts believe voters in Abkhazia are focused on domestic issues over foreign policy. In addition, they said the foreign policy goals of the three major candidates were virtually identical. None of the three top candidates (Bagapsh, Raul Khadzhimba or Beslan Butba) are "pro-Moscow in the ordinary sense," journalist Vadim Dubnov wrote in pieces for "Gazeta.ru." Still, Konovalov predicted that whoever wins will start with a declaration of good relations toward Russia. He saw in Abkhazia neither a public concern about, nor desire for, possible annexation by Russia.

¶14. (C) Vladimir Zharikhin of the CIS Institute, who had visited Abkhazia to observe the campaign and meet with candidates, said that Bagapsh's cooperation with Russia as "president" both helps and hurts him. Voters credit economic improvements since Bagapsh took office in part to Russian investment and trade. However, some linked charges of Bagapsh's corruption to his being under the influence of the

Russian government.

Technical support

15. (C) Technically, Russia is supporting the elections by allowing Abkhaz "citizens" in Russia to vote in polling stations in Moscow and Cherkessk, the capital of the Karachay-Cherkes Republic. Prospective voters will be required to show an Abkhaz "national passport" in order to vote. Russian Public Chamber member Aleksandr Brod said that a delegation of Russian Public Chamber members would visit Abkhazia in order to monitor the election and study conditions regarding "voters' rights."

16. (C) Note: This constitutes far less attention than Russia gave to the South Ossetian "elections" May 31, 2009, when representatives of the Federation Council, the State Duma, Russia's Central Election Commission, the Russian Foundation for Free Elections, the Russian Public Chamber, the Inter-regional Fund for Fair Elections, and the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights observed the elections (reftel). End Note.

Comment

17. (C) The apparently relaxed attitude of the GOR toward the upcoming "elections" reflects official and "expert" community consensus that, regardless of the outcome, Russian-Abkhaz

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relations will remain on a steady keel, with Russia continuing to exercise strong influence.

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